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ABSTRACT

Five factors should be considered in understanding the value of children's literature in the elementary school curriculum, as both an aesthetic and utilitarian experience. Children's literature is significant (1) as an information supplement in science, art, social studies, mathematics, and other curriculum subjects; (2) as a vital part of the reading program, including oral reading, vocabulary development, and literature enjoyment; (3) as an important part of the development of listening, speaking, and writing skills; (4) as an area of study to promote the understanding and appreciation of literature; and (5) as a valuable contribution to the development of each child in his understanding of himself and of others. (JM)

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USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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What is the role of children's literature in the total curriculum? How may it be used to best advantage? There may be those who believe that literature is an aesthetic experience and to use it any other way would be unthinkable. There may be others who consider only the utilitarian use of literature and believe its real value lies in its practical uses. Perhaps most of us would prefer a combination of the two viewpoints. This article attempts to point out how children's literature may permeate the entire school day and, hopefully, strengthen cognitive learning without neglecting or destroying its aesthetic value as "literature."

First, children's literature may make a significant contribution to every subject matter area of the curriculum. Whether the learning be in the area of mathematics, art, science, social studies or any other, there are children's books, stories and poems which will complement and supplement the information gained from textbooks, films, field trips, and other media. Nancy Larrick has called the textbook and the library book the "warp and woof" of the study program in elementary schools today.¹

For correlation with the science curriculum, there are well-written non-fiction titles which provide information on every topic imaginable—from rocks to space to trees to sound to insects to human anatomy. Arbuthnot said that the publication of informational books for children may be the most notable trend in the field during the second half of the twentieth century.² There are also biographies of scientists, poems about night and the stars and airplanes, myths concerning seasonal change and why spiders spin their web, animal stories containing accurate information about the characteristics of both wild and domestic animals, as well as other types of literature which are valuable in science units.

To enrich the social studies curriculum, there are non-fiction titles concerning every period of man's history, practically every cultural group, and man's living includ-

ing forms of government, transportation, communication and ways of work. Historical fiction brings to life the spirit and excitement of other times. Biographies provide characters with whom the reader may identify as well as enrich his understanding of times and events in the period in which the biographee lived.

Folk literature, including folk tales, myths, epics and ballads may be used to develop a feeling for the various cultures being studied; for example Greek myths may accompany a study of the Greek civilization or Paul Bunyan tall tales may enliven a study of the lumbering industry.

Stories with settings in other lands will reflect the sociological, cultural and technological development of these countries. Through contemporary stories of realism set in the United States, the reader may gain insight into regional, cultural and other differences and similarities within our own democracy. Also, there is much poetry concerning people, places and events which vitalizes the social studies program.

What has been said about trade books and the science and social studies program applies equally well to other subject matter areas. In any area, children's literature may be used to extend and clarify concepts. However, it should be noted that these books, stories and poems (except for the non-fiction) are not written to present facts and therefore the use of these should not be limited to correlation with units or topics being explored nor should their evaluation be based on the quantity of factual information included.

Second, children's literature is a vital part of the developmental reading program. Whether basal readers or other study materials form the nucleus of the reading program, trade books provide practice in all of the skills taught, including oral reading, critical and interpretative reading, vocabulary development, adjustment of rate of reading, and appreciation and enjoyment of literature. For example, to develop the meaning of new words, Huck and Kuhn tell of the teacher who, after reading *The Lonely Doll* by Wright, asked the kindergarten children what

lonely meant. They gave different meanings and finally one small, serious boy said, "To be lonely is to have no one to walk beside you."³

Of course, in an individualized reading program children's literature may become the basic material to teach the child the skills of reading.

Third, as an integral part of the language arts program other than reading, literature fosters the development of skills in listening, speaking and writing as well as an understanding of language. When children hear well-selected stories and poems effectively read their ability to listen attentively may be strengthened. In addition, with the teacher's direct guidance, specific listening skills as listening for sequence, to anticipate outcome, to evaluate, to draw conclusions and generalizations may be improved.

The oral language program may be improved through activities based on literature. Literature provides meaningful content for oral language experiences. As the child talks about books he has enjoyed, participates in dramatizations, puppet plays and choral speaking, he has opportunity for increasing his effectiveness in oral communication. Specifically, he may learn to speak with appropriate volume and rate with a well-modulated voice, to speak with clearness of enunciation and pronunciation, to develop vocabulary, to organize ideas and to speak so that he maintains the interest of the audience.

Also, written composition skills are strengthened as literature provides models of good writing. Awareness of style, elements of plot development, how authors achieve characterization, sensory impression, imagery and mood, and attention to the power and beauty of words should result in better writing by children. When the student becomes familiar with the fable form from reading or hearing a number he may write one. When he becomes familiar with various forms of poetry as free verse, the

limerick, haiku and cinquain from hearing a number read, his own poems may be varied in form.

Literature, too, suggests content to write about. The possibilities are numerous; however, to suggest a few, the student may simply write his reactions to the events of the story or to a character, he may place himself in the main character's role and write how he would have felt or what he would have done, he may compare two characters or two stories, he may develop a story from a secondary character's viewpoint, he may rewrite an episode as it could appear in a newspaper account, or he may write what he thinks the main character is like and doing ten years following the conclusions of the story. Each story and situation offers a fresh and creative writing idea for children.

Literature increases sensitivity to and enjoyment of language. It can make the child aware of concepts about language; for example, the fact that language changes may be illustrated with selections containing archaic expressions and others containing new words. Or usage of language may be approached through a comparison of dialect in literature. The mountaineer's colloquialisms in *Down, Down the Mountain* by Ellis Credle, the tenant farmer's language in *Cotton In My Sack* by Lois Lenski, the Quaker's speech pattern in *Thee, Hannah* by Marguerite de Angeli, the shepherd's dialect in . . . and *Now Miguel* by Joseph Krumboltz, the modern teenager's vernacular in *It's Like This, Cat* by Emily Neville may illustrate various dialects and develop a respect for differences in language.

Fourth, children's literature deserves some time in the school day as a legitimate and important area of study in its own right. Through a planned program extending through all the grades, children will be taught the taxonomy of literature. For example, they will learn the difference between a folk tale and epic, the characteristics of a fable, to identify the theme of a story, to recognize flashback, foreshadowing and climax. Although it should be noted that too much discussion and analysis is undesirable, a well-executed program will result in the ultimate goal of enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of the best in literature.

Fifth, and perhaps most important of all, literature is valuable and should be a part of the school day because of its contribution to the personal development of the individual. George Woodberry said, "Literature is not an object of study, but a mode of pleasure; it is not a thing to be known but to be lived."⁴ We encourage a child to read and we read to him because, through identification with characters, he grows in self-understanding and understanding others. Literature sharpens his sensitivity to nature, people and human relationships. It aids in the development of personal values, attitudes and code of conduct. It broadens his horizons in time and space. It provides enjoyment and relaxation as a leisure time activity. It stimulates his imagination and gives him dreams

and vision. For all of these reasons, we can afford no less than our best effort to provide the "right book for the child at the right time."

In conclusion, in order to effectively guide children's use of literature in the total program of the elementary school, teachers may want to consider the following suggestions:

1. Know the children—their interests, achievement, potential, background, goals.
2. Know books—personally, the new and the old, all types.
3. Read to children—every day, all grade levels.
4. Schedule time for children to read—every child, every day, something of his own choosing.
5. Make books available—on many topics, many levels, many types.
6. Provide opportunities for sharing—frequent, varied and creative methods.
7. Use library resources—constantly, public as well as school.
8. Enlist active support of parents—to read to their children, buy them books, take them to the public library.
9. Be enthusiastic about books—sincerely so.
10. Make reading pleasurable rather than a chore.
11. Select the best in the field.

With careful selection of materials and creative planning for its use, children's literature may be exploited with rich rewards for every child in the elementary school.

Woodberry, George, The Appreciation of Literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922.

Wright, Dare, The Lonely Doll. New York: Doubleday, 1957.

FOOTNOTES

¹Nancy Larrick, A Teacher's Guide to Children's Books (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1960), p. 121.

²May Hill Arbuthnot, Children and Books (Atlanta: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1964), p. 48.

³Charlotte Huck and Doris Young Kuhn, Children's Literature in the Elementary School (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 576.

⁴George Woodberry, The Appreciation of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), p. 14.

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